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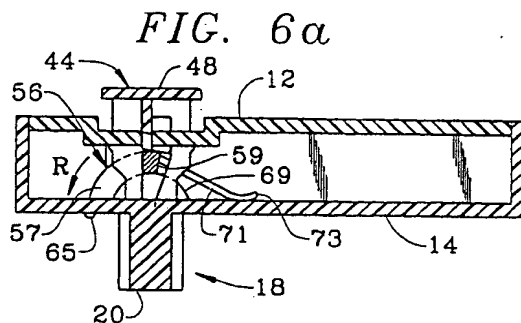
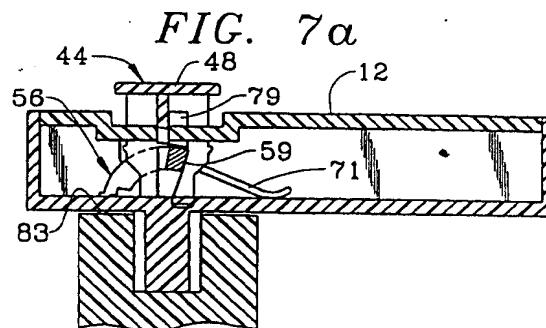
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(54) Electrical connector with push button locking mechanism

(57) An electrical connector 2, for example for automotive airbag applications, comprises a locking device 44 that has locking extensions 52,53 insertable behind resilient latches 26 of the connector to securely lock them when the connectors are coupled. A pivotally mounted catch 56 prevents precocious insertion of the push button locking member 48 by engaging a shoulder 81 thereof. Upon full mating of the connectors 2 and 3, a camming protrusion 65 of the catch 56 abuts the mating connector causing rotation of the catch which releases the push button 48. The push button can then be fully depressed into the fully locked position. The catch has a spring member 71 that ensures rotation of the catch into its initial position, when the locking device 48 is pulled up to uncouple the connectors.



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Description

This invention relates to an electrical connector, the connector having a latching mechanism with a latch locking member to ensure secure coupling with a mating connector.

A connector for an ignition device, for example an automotive airbag ignition device, is described in US 4,170,939. Ignition of airbag devices in automobiles is an important safety function that requires a safe and reliable electrical connection. It is therefore important to ensure that an electrical connector for an ignition device, is fully coupled with its mating connector, and is securely locked in the coupled position even when subject to mechanical or thermal solicitation. In US 5,314,345, an electrical connector suited for airbag ignition applications, comprises a connector latchable to a mating pin connector by means of resilient cantilever beam latches that engage behind shoulders of the mating pin connector. In order to ensure that the resilient latches do not inadvertently uncouple, a locking clip comprising extensions insertable alongside and against the resilient latches is provided to ensure that the resilient latches remain in the locked position. The locking clip is attached to the housing, but is separately manipulated and assembled into the locking position once the connectors are coupled. Mating of the connector therefore requires a number of manipulations, and in certain circumstances a human operator may miss out one of the assembly steps or effect it in a faulty manner, for example forgetting to insert the locking clip or not inserting it fully.

It is a continuous requirement, for example in the automotive industry, to simplify assembly procedures to reduce assembly time, whilst nevertheless increasing the reliability of assembly. The latter is not only important for reliability of safety features such as airbag ignition devices, but also to reduce the cost of production. It would therefore be desirable to produce a reliable connector latching system with locking feature, that can be easily coupled to a mating connector with a minimum number of operations, and easy detection of faulty latching if this should occur.

It is therefore an object of this invention to provide a connector, for example for automotive airbag ignition devices, that can be coupled in a simple but secure and reliable manner.

It is an object of this invention to provide a connector that can be securely latched and locked to a complementary connector, the connector ensuring secure and reliable coupling and easy detection of incorrect coupling if this should occur.

Objects of this invention have been achieved by providing an electrical connector comprising latches engageable with complementary latching means of a complementary connector for latching the connectors together in a mated condition, the connector further comprising a latch locking device having extensions engageable behind the latches once the connectors are

mated together to lock the latches in the latching position, wherein the connector further comprises a catch having a retention shoulder that engages the locking device to maintain it in the unlocked position, the catch being movable by camming engagement thereof with the complementary connector in the fully mated position, such that the retention shoulder releases the locking device and allows full insertion to lock the connector. The latches could extend in a mating direction of the connectors, wherein the locking extensions are insertable behind the latches in the mating direction of the connectors. The locking extensions could be attached to a push button extending above a top wall of the connector remote from the mating end, in the unlocked position, such that during mating the push button is merely depressed in order to effect the locking. Mating of the connectors in the insertion direction, and subsequent actuation of the locking extensions also in the insertion direction by means of the push button extending beyond a top surface, requires only a single operation by an operator. Faulty coupling is easily detected, because if the connector is not fully inserted, the locking extensions will not be able to bias the latch arms and thus the locking extension will remain in the uninserted position. The push button provides easy visual detection of the unlocked state, as it can be provided flush with the top wall of the connector in the fully locked position, but projecting beyond the top wall in the unlocked position. The catch however ensures that the locking device is only actuated once the connectors are fully coupled, thereby providing a complete, secure, and reliable connection whilst nevertheless enabling rapid single action plugging connection therebetween. Other advantageous will be apparent from the description, drawings and claims.

An embodiment of this invention will now be described by way of example with reference to the figures, whereby;

Figure 1 is an isometric view of a connector according to this invention showing the mating side of the connector;

Figure 2 is an isometric view of the connector of figure 1 but toward the top wall with some of the top wall removed;

Figure 3 is an exploded isometric view of the connector according to figures 1 and 2, showing the latch locking device and the locking device catch;

Figure 4a is an isometric view of a top wall of the connector with the latch locking device and the catch in the unlocked position;

Figure 4b is a view similar to that of figure 4a but without the top wall;

Figures 5a and 5b are similar to figures 4a and 4b respectively, but showing the locking device and catch in the fully locked position;

Figure 6a is a cross-sectional view showing some of the connector whereby the locking device is in the unlocked position; held there by the catch;

Figure 6b is a simplified view similar to that of figure

6a, without the housing of the connector;

Figure 6c is an end view of the connector (view in the direction arrow 6c of figure 6a);

Figures 7a to 7c are similar to figures 6a to 6c respectively, but showing the catch cammed to the release position;

Figures 8a to 8c are similar to figures 6a to 6c respectively, but showing the latch locking device in the fully locked position.

Referring to figures 1-3 and 8, an electrical connector 3 is for mating to a complementary connector 3 which may, for example, be interconnected to an airbag ignition device. The complementary connector 3 comprises an insulative housing 4 surrounding a profiled cavity area 6 within which a pair of pin contacts 8 extend in an axial (mating) direction.

The connector 2 comprises an insulative housing 10 having a top wall 12 and opposed thereto a bottom wall 14, and side and end walls 15, 16 respectively, extending therebetween. The housing 10 further comprises a contact receiving section 18 extending axially below the bottom wall 14 towards a mating end 20. The contact receiving section 18 extends in a prismatic fashion and has an outer wall 22 profiled to be received in the cavity 6 of the complementary connector. The "dog-bone" shape of the profile 22 is common in the automotive airbag industry, and is shown for example in US 4,170,939. The contact receiving section 18, comprises cavities 24 for receiving receptacle contacts (not shown) for mating with the complimentary connector pin contacts 8.

The connector 2 further comprises resilient latches 26 extending from the bottom wall 14 towards the mating end 20, and positioned proximate opposing sides 28, 29 of the contact receiving section 18. The latches 26 are in the shape of cantilever beams attached to the housing substantially at the bottom wall 14 and extending in the direction of the mating end 20 to free ends 30. The latches 26 are separated from the sides 28, 29 of the terminal receiving section 18 by a gap 32 (also see figure 6c). The latch 26 further comprises a locking protrusion 34 that provides a locking shoulder 36 for engagement with complementary latching means along walls of the cavity 6 of the complementary connector.

The connector 2 is mated to the connector 3 by plugging the connector contact receiving section 18 into the complimentary cavity 6, whereby the latch protrusions 34 engage the end walls 42 of the complementary connector cavity 6, and resiliently bias inward until full insertion of the connectors 2 and 3 together, whereby the latching protrusions 34 latch onto the complementary latching means and bias out to their natural state.

Referring to figures 2 and 4, the connector 2 further comprises a locking device 44 comprising an actuation member 46 (see figures 1 and 2) in the form of a push button 48 having side finger grips 50, the actuation member 46 being attached to locking extensions 52, 53. In the unlocked position, the locking extensions 52, 53

are not engaged in the gap 32 as shown in figure 6c.

The connector 2 further comprises a catch 56 that comprises a pair of pivotally mounted camming bars 57 held together by a retention bar 59 (also see figure 6a) that has an oblique retention shoulder 61 (see figure 6b). The camming bars 57 extend arcuately from an attachment end 63 at the retention bar 59, to a camming protrusion 65. A lower surface 67 of the camming bars 57 rests on an arcuate (semi-circular) surface or hump 69 (see figures 3 and 6a) within the connector housing to enable rotational sliding movement of the catch thereon. The top wall 12 of the housing retains the catch in sliding movement against the semi-circular hump of 69. The catch further comprises cantilever beam spring members 71 extending from the retention bar in an opposed direction to the camming bars 57. When the catch is mounted on the hump 69 in the housing, as best seen in figure 6a, the spring members 71 are resiliently biased, proximate their free end 73, against the bottom wall 14 of the housing. As best seen in figure 1, the housing bottom wall 14 is provided with cut-outs 75 that allow the camming protrusion 65 to project there-through.

Referring to figure 4a, the locking extensions 52, 53 are positioned proximate an inner side 77 of the locking bars 57, whereby the retention bar 59 is positioned in a slot 79 between the locking extensions 52 and 53. Referring to figures 5a and 5b, one of the locking extensions 53 is provided with a retention shoulder 81 projecting therefrom that engages with the retention shoulder 61 of the retention bar 59 in the unlocked position as shown in figure 6a and 6b. Due to the resilient biasing of the cantilever spring 71, the catch 56 is pivotally biased in the latch retention position as shown in figure 6a and depicted by the arrow R, whereby the camming protrusions 65 project through the cut-outs 75 beyond the connector bottom wall 14. When the locking device is in the unlocked position, the push button 48 projects well above the top wall 12 in a clearly visible manner.

The push button 48 is positioned above (in the mating direction of the connectors) the contact receiving section 18. An operator coupling the connectors 2 and 3, would therefore grasp the connector, first inserting the contact receiving section 18 into the complementary connector cavity 6, applying pressure on the push button 48. The catch 56 however prevents insertion of the actuation member 46 into the fully locked position. The connector latches 26 are thus allowed to bias inwardly until the connectors 2 and 3 are fully mated and the latches click into their locking position. At that moment, as shown in figures 7a-7c, the camming protrusion 65 of the catch abuts a complementary mating face 83 of the complementary connector 3 thus causing the catch to pivot in opposition to the spring force of the spring arms 71. The pivoting movement of the catch releases the retention shoulder 61 from the locking device retention shoulder 81. Continued depression on the locking device fully inserts the locking extensions 52, 53 behind the latches 26 as shown in figure 8c, whereby the catch

retention bar 59 passes through the slot 79 between the extension bars 52 and 53.

In the fully locked position, the resilient latches 26 are prevented from inward biasing by the locking extensions 52,53, thereby securely locking the connectors 2,3 together. In the fully locked position, the push button 48 is advantageously flush with the top wall 12 to prevent damage or catching onto external objects, as well as providing a clear visible indication of complete latching and locking.

Release of the connectors can be simply effected by pulling up on the finger grips 50, whereby in the fully unlocked position, the catch pivots to its retention position as shown in figure 6a by virtue of the spring action of the spring arm 71.

Advantageously therefore, an operator can mate the connectors in a single movement in the mating direction until the actuation member is fully depressed. Precocious engagement of the locking device is prevented whilst nevertheless enabling rapid and simple coupling of the connectors.

Claims

1. A electrical connector (2) for mating in a mating direction to a complementary connector (3) having a cavity (6) and terminals (8) therein, comprising an insulative housing (10) and electrical terminals, the housing having a top wall (12), a bottom wall (14), and side and end walls 15,16 respectively extending therebetween, the housing further comprising a contact receiving section (18) extending in the mating direction to a mating end (20), the connector further comprising at least one biasable latch (26) for latching the connectors (2,3) together and a locking device (44) comprising an actuation member (46) having at least one locking extension (52,53) insertable from an unlocked position, to a locked position alongside the latch for locking the latch when the connector is coupled to the complementary connector, characterized in that the locking device (44) further comprises a catch (56) comprising a retention shoulder (61) engageable against a retention shoulder (81) of the actuation member when the connectors (2,3) are uncoupled to maintain the actuation member in the unlocked position, the catch further comprising a camming member (57) engageable with the complementary connector (3) upon full mating, the camming member linked to the retention shoulder (61) so as to disengage the shoulder from the actuation member shoulder (81) during camming engagement of the catch with the complementary connector, thereby releasing the actuation member for insertion thereof into the locked position.
2. The connector of claim 1 wherein the contact receiving section (18) extends below the bottom wall (12) of the housing, and the latches (26) extend alongside the contact receiving section.
3. The connector of claim 1 or 2 wherein the latch (26) is in the shape of a cantilever beam, attached at one end to the housing proximate the bottom wall (14) and extending to a free end (30) positioned towards the mating end (20).
4. The connector of any preceding claim wherein the locking device (44) comprises a push button (48) extending above the top wall (12) in the unlocked state and attached to the locking extensions (52) for depressing the locking extensions into the locked state.
5. The connector of claim 4 wherein the push button (48) is substantially flush with, or below, the top wall (12) when pushed into the locked state.
6. The connector of claim 4 or 5 wherein the push button is situated substantially in line with the contact receiving section (18), with respect to the mating direction.
7. The connector of any preceding claim wherein the catch (56) has a spring member (71) for biasing the catch into engagement with the actuation member when the latter is in the unlocked position.
8. The connector of any preceding claim wherein the catch is pivotly mounted in the housing (10), whereby engagement and disengagement of the retention shoulder (61) is effected by rotation movement of the catch.
9. The connector of claim 8 wherein the catch rests slidingly on an arcuate hump (69) within the housing (10).
10. The connector of any preceding claim wherein the catch comprises a retention bar (59) on which the retention shoulder (61) is provided, the retention bar extending transversely to the mating direction and attached to the camming member that comprises a camming bar (57) extending from the retention bar to a camming protrusion (65).
11. The connector of claim 10 wherein the camming protrusion is accessible through a cut-out (75) in the bottom wall (14) for abutment with the complementary connector (31) upon full mating, whereupon the abutment moves the retention bar to disengage it from the actuation member.
12. The connector of claim 10 or 11 wherein the camming bar (10) is arcuate and rests slidingly on the arcuate hump (69) within the housing.
13. The connector of any one of the claims 10-12

wherein the catch spring member (71) extends from the retention bar (59) in an opposed direction to the camming bar (10).

14. The connector of any one of the preceding claims wherein the locking extensions (52,53) comprises a slot (79) extending in the mating direction for receiving a retention bar (59) of the catch (56), upon which the retention shoulder (61) is provided, and wherein the retention shoulder (81) of the actuation member projects into the slot (79).

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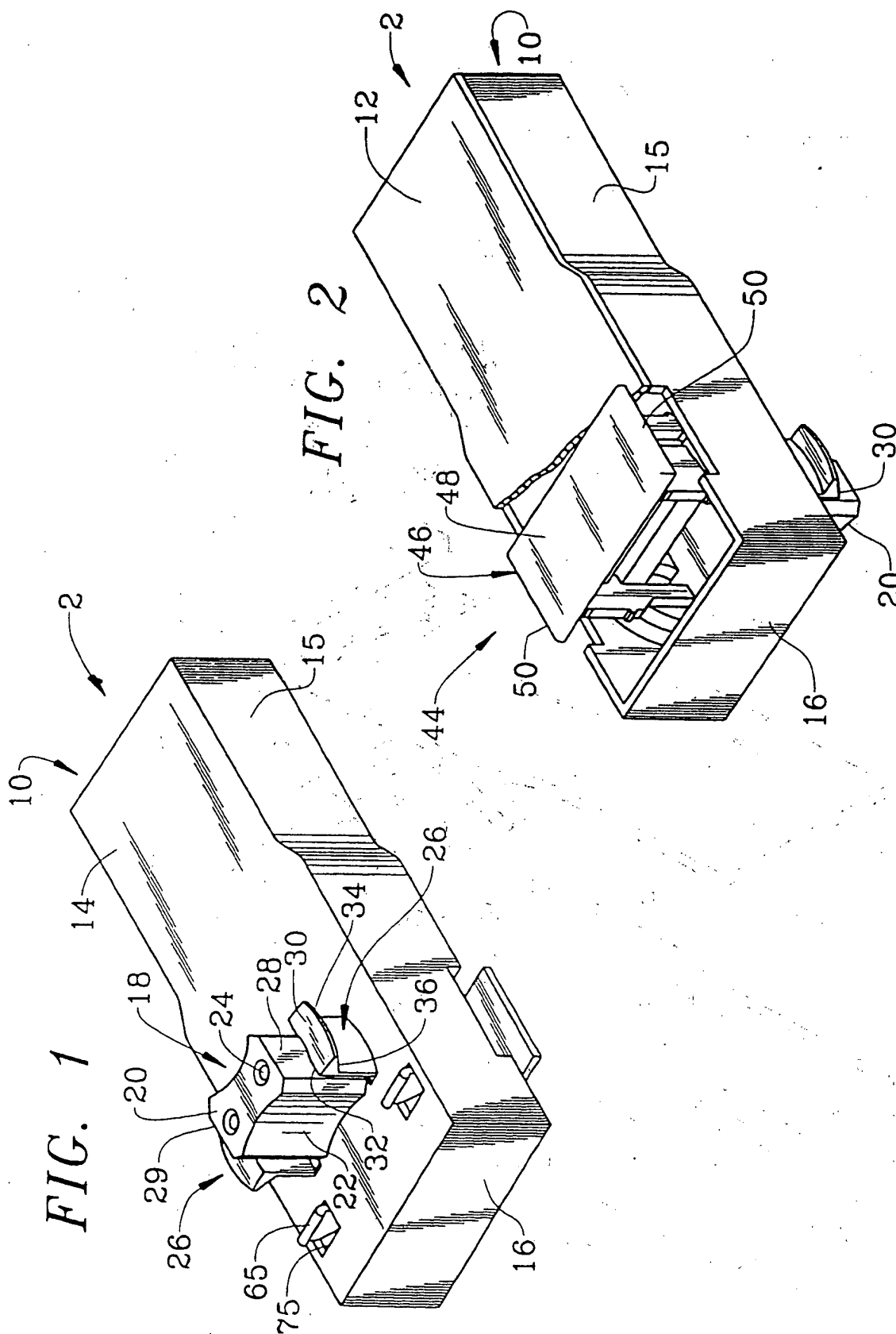


FIG. 3

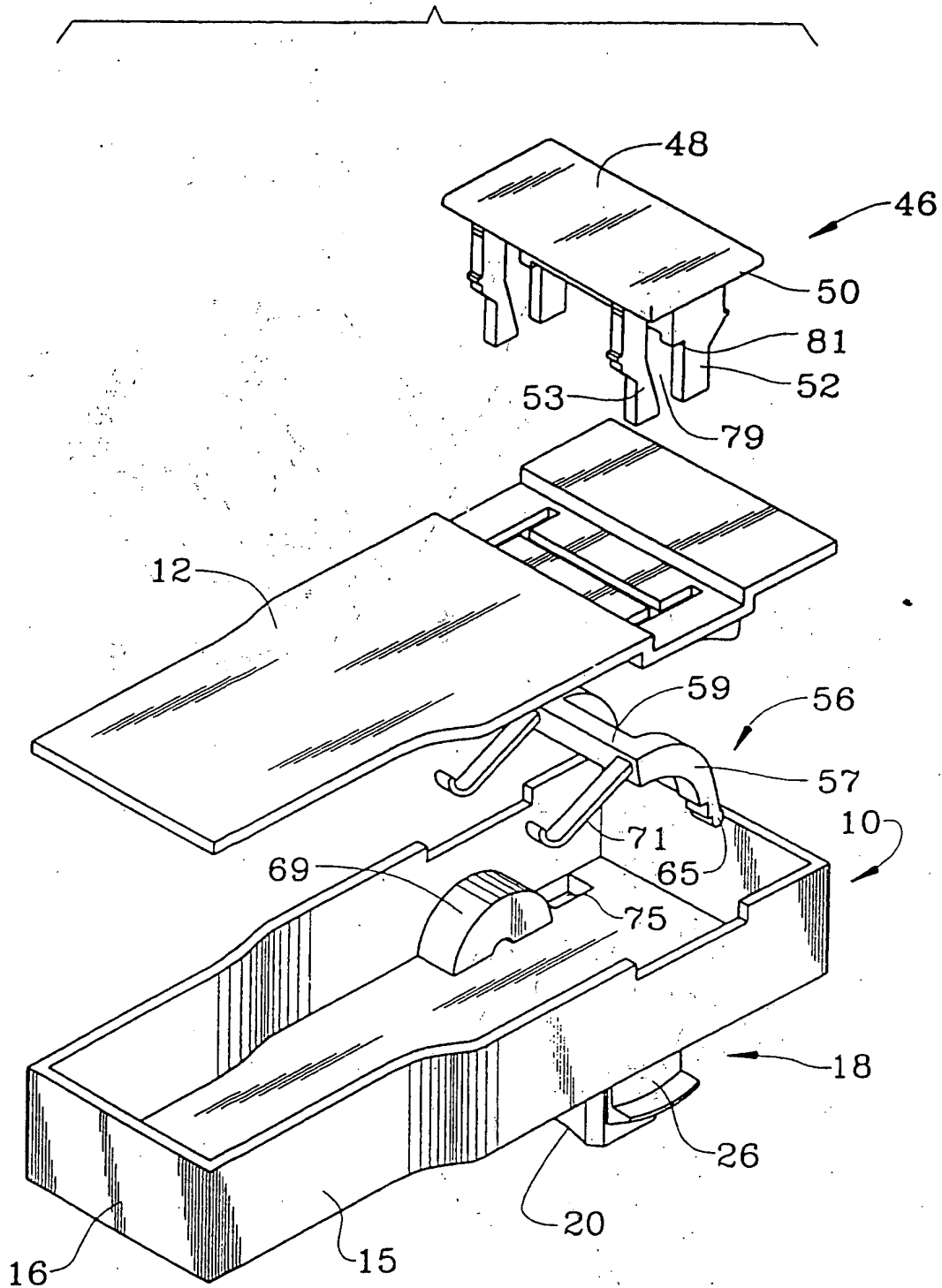


FIG. 4b

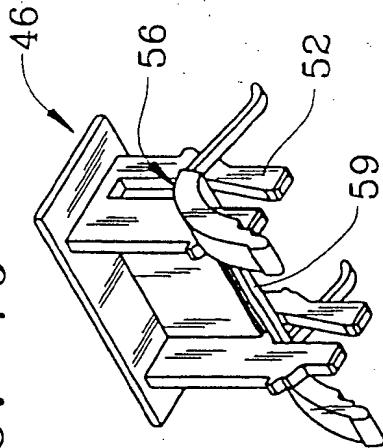


FIG. 4a

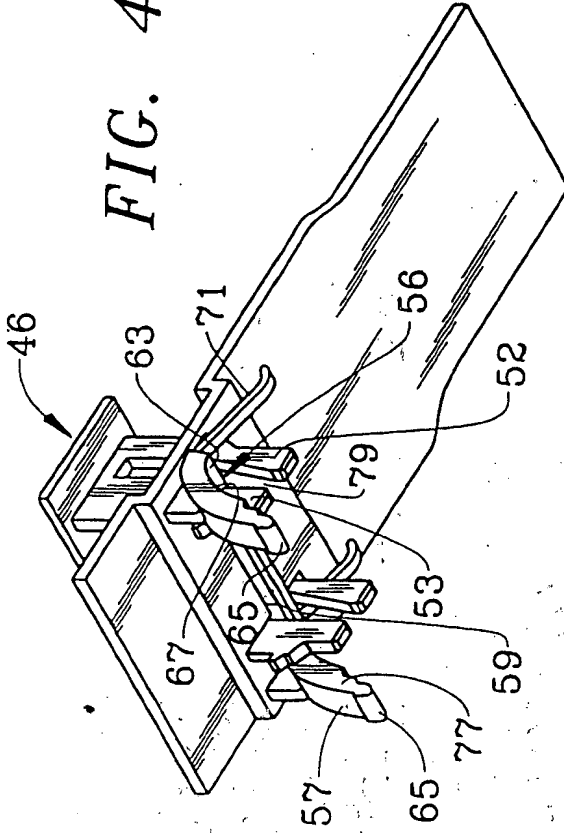


FIG. 5b

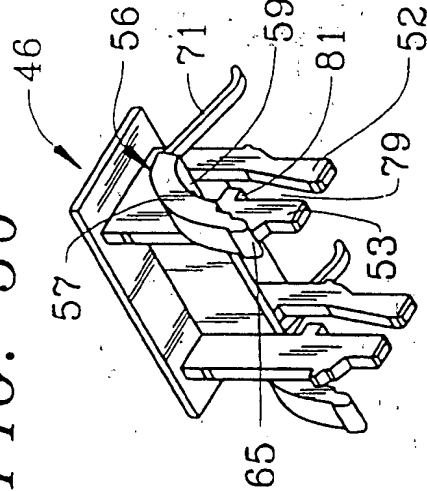


FIG. 5a

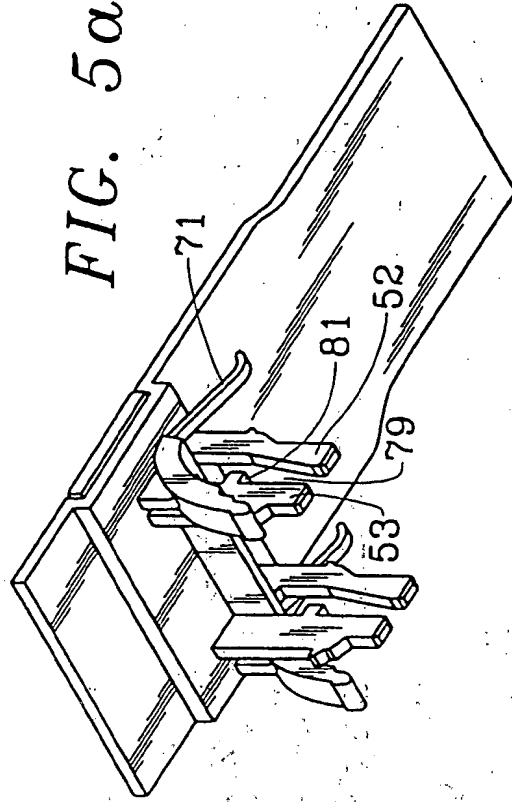


FIG. 6c

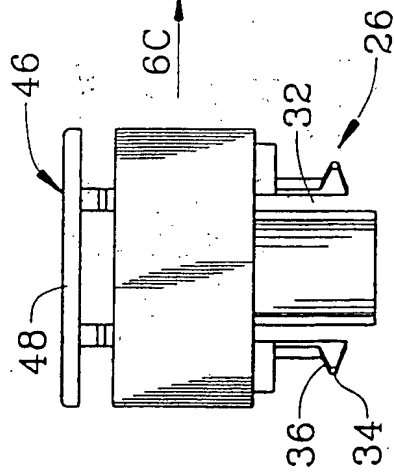


FIG. 6a

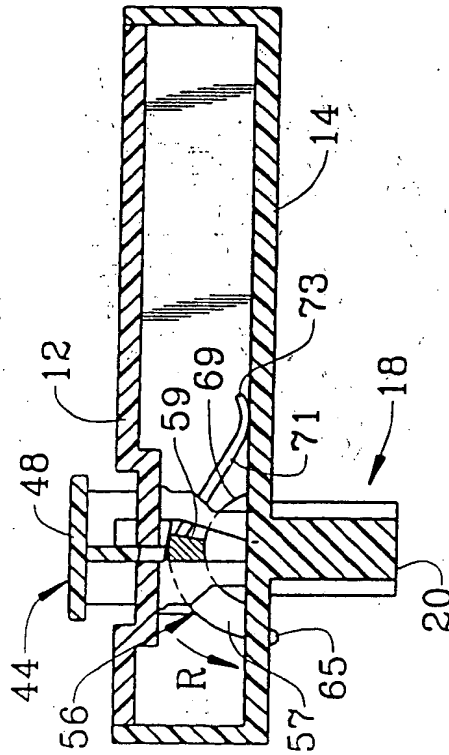


FIG. 6b

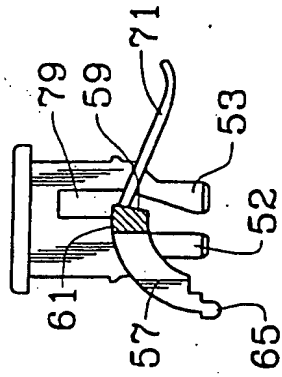


FIG. 7c

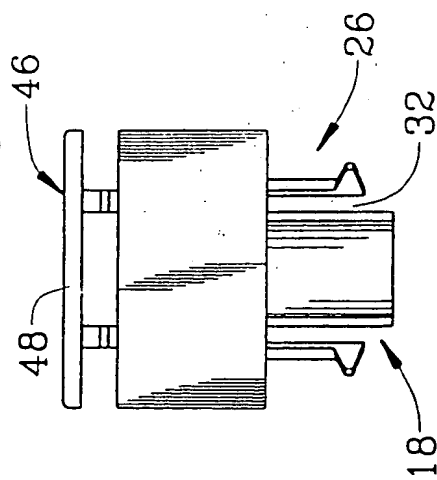


FIG. 7a

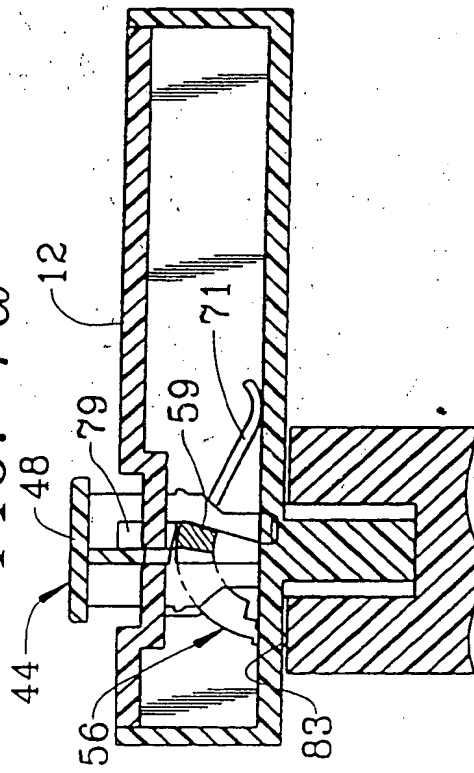


FIG. 7b

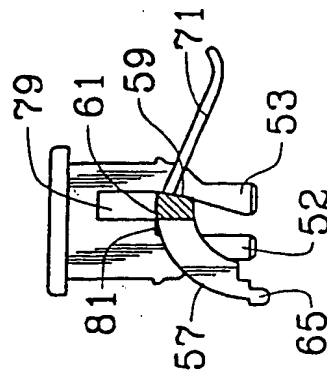


FIG. 8c

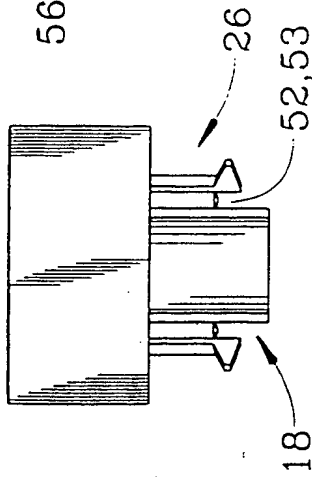


FIG. 8a

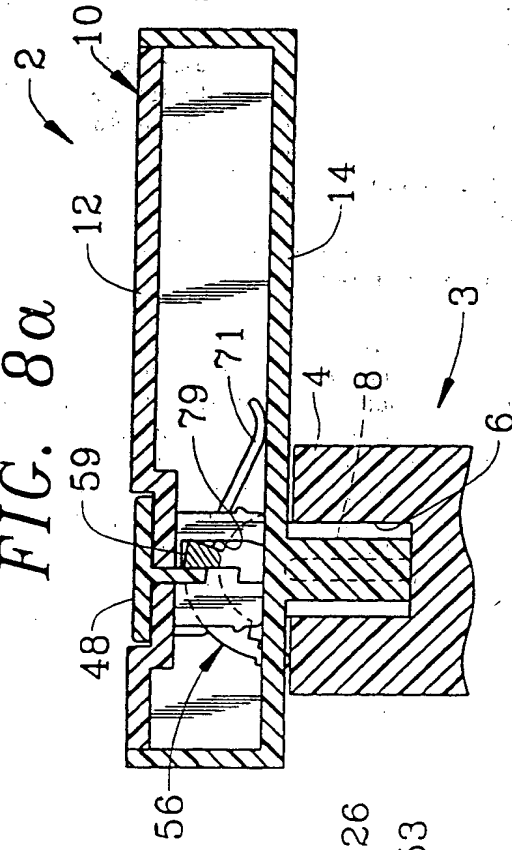


FIG. 8b

